

## **Ekphrastic Portrait of Pre-Raphaelite Models**

**Malgorzata Wronka-Szybko**

My thesis is a combination of two seemingly separate subjects – ekphrasis and Pre-Raphaelite models. Both notions are equally important in my thesis and, therefore, to make them clear enough, I decided to elaborate on them in separate chapters, and to finally merge them in the last part of my study. In the first two chapters I take up the specifics of ekphrasis and I look for the correlation between the verbal and the visual.

In the first chapter I start my discussion with the very beginnings of the word-image relationship which can be found in the Bible. On the basis of my analysis, I contend that even though in the Scriptures the word is directly associated with the beginning of the world, as we can conclude from Saint John's words, it is the mental image which seems to prevail, giving rise to the aural and, then, visual reality. However, this viewpoint differs from empirical epistemology in which the progression is from picture to ideogram and phonic/sound. Even though words and images belong to two separate systems of linguistics and nonlinguistics, I claim that their complementation supports the reception of information. Words are arbitrary signs which, to be understood, need either physical events or the previously acquired knowledge of a concept. Therefore, words and images should not be taken as two different entities but just as two different ways of looking at and describing the same object.

The discussion of the verbal-visual relationship led me to the idea of the “speaking picture”. At the beginning, ekphrasis referred to realistic descriptions of objects, people or nature, yet, Simonides's allusions to the correspondence and mutuality of painting and poetry molded the concept of ekphrasis which is best known today. Obviously, ekphrasis should not be associated only with the idea of the verbal representation of the visual artwork. Ekphrasis is a wide term which covers not only various categories within the painting-poetry relationship, but which also extends to other artistic disciplines such as prose, film, theatre, music and photography. It means that we

should interpret modern ekphrasis as any artistic representation of another artistic representation.

However, since different arts do not always translate each other well (or rather as Leonardo da Vinci claims, some artists are incapable of creating an ideal imitation), when taking the example of painting and poetry, in the second chapter I decided to discuss the concept of artistic rivalry which shows that the correspondence between arts is not always obvious. Even though ekphrasis proclaims the unification of writing and painting, the voices of, for example, Giorgio Vasari, Michaelangelo (or Gustave Flaubert,) about the disparities between arts are also right. For instance, double works of Pandora, Ophelia or Fair Rosamund set an example of ekphrastic pairs in which one of the components provides a more vivid and realistic depiction than the other one.

Ekphrasis is the form of imitation achieved through different means of representation, and thus I claim that it should be seen through the differences and similarities which words and images offer. The nature of ekphrasis is contradictory and I believe that scholars need to consider this concept as two opposing categories – “vs/as” – word vs image, which maintains the distinction between two separate systems of perception, and word as image, which, on the contrary, breaks with traditional categorization and invites multiperspectivism. I would say that the nature of Pre-Raphaelite art, which I decided to analyze in terms of double representations, resembles the character of ekphrasis – on the one hand, Pre-Raphaelite art follows fixed rules of truth and naturalness, but on the other hand, it ranges a number of topics.

Since the Pre-Raphaelites remain unique in their ability to merge painting and literature, I chose their artworks as an example of nineteenth century ekphrasis. I found it important to introduce in the third chapter the foundations of the Brotherhood and to group their artworks according to their themes. I focused on the dominating motifs in Pre-Raphaelite art. On the basis of this analysis I may say that the Pre-Raphaelites developed a wide and diverse array of subjects which embrace five main categories: religious, medieval, pastoral, ekphrastic and, if you will, female. Since the representations of women occupy a significant part of the Brotherhood's art, I devoted a whole subchapter to another categorization, this time based on the types of women

appearing in Pre-Raphaelite paintings. I have considered five groups of Pre-Raphaelite females: Saints (in particular frequent representations of the Virgin Mary), fairies, literary heroines (for instance the Sleeping Beauty or the Lady of Shalott), fallen women, and *femmes fatales*.

This wide spectrum of female portraits made me look more closely at the figures represented by the Pre-Raphaelites. While the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood is a well-known phenomenon in the history of English art, the Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood is still undiscovered. In my thesis I crave to show that the Brotherhood models functioned not as one-painting sitters, but rather they played an important role in art and life of the Pre-Raphaelites. Since the public often treats models as anonymous women, or as imaginary projections of artists' minds, I hope that with the discussion on the private lives of Elizabeth Siddal, Fanny Cornforth, Jane Morris, and Alexa Wilding, I drew closer the figures of these four women. The biographical research indicates that they all came from working class families and modelling was for them a chance for better earnings. The character of each of the stunners can be clearly defined and, thus, I would say that Siddal was delicate and melancholic, Cornforth was determined but underestimated by artistic society, Morris was sophisticated and self-interested, while Wilding was mysterious and reserved. Their looks also differed significantly, which opposes the false opinion that all the Pre-Raphaelite models looked the same. To enumerate them again, Siddal was thin and red-headed, Cornforth was robust but with regular features, Morris was pale and dark-haired, and Wilding, with her softness, auburn hair and long neck, was a combination of all of them. It shows that each of the woman fits into a different pattern and this caused me to investigate whether the Pre-Raphaelites maintained this distinction in their paintings.

Therefore, instead of analyzing the art of the Brotherhood merely in terms of ekphrasis, I decided to widen the scope of my research and inquire if Pre-Raphaelite ekphrastic works representing imaginary, historical and legendary heroines, comply with the biographies of the models who posed for them. It means that my objective in the final chapter was, firstly, to determine the closeness of the verbal and the visual version of an artwork, and secondly, to explore if the

model's identity is subsumed to the artistic requirements set up by the artist. My primary intention was to structure the fourth chapter according to the models' names and in this way show their proximity to the artistic themes for which they posed. However, I believe that the final division of the last part of my thesis is more relevant since it pays attention to one more aspect, namely, that various Pre-Raphaelite artworks provide joining elements which, at first glance, appear to be detached from each other. For instance, I grouped Aurelia, Lady Lilith and Venus Verticordia as women whose gaze constitutes an important element of artistic analysis, and I discussed the Lady of Shalott, Proserpine and the Blessed Damozel under the common motif of "Imprisonment".

On the basis of ekphrastic analysis which I have conducted, I can state that words and images are able to achieve similar, but not identical effects. The correspondence between double works which I analyze in my study can be found in each pair, however, some of them show closer proximity than others. In some cases, for example in *Ophelia* and *The Lady of Shalott*, the author of ekphrasis adds additional information which either expresses his personal artistic view or it is meant to aid the verbal-visual translation. In *Lady Lilith* and *Pandora* the visual softens the verbal image of these women, while in *Found* the poem complements the painting and widens its interpretation. However, the differences between verbal and visual representations are not so significant so as to reject the hypothesis about the verbal-visual correspondence. On the contrary, the ekphrastic artworks which I analyzed display surprising proximity. As a reminder, in the painting *Beatrice Meeting Dante at a Wedding Feast*, Rossetti very carefully imitates Dante, who leaned "unto a painting that ran round the walls of [the] house". The artist also successfully re-presents the blessed damozel imprisoned behind the "gold bar" and he re-tells the story of Astarte positioned "betwixt" the sun and the moon. Without exception, each ekphrastic pair which I provide in my thesis, shares some elements. I claim that differences which I mentioned, should be seen as a complementation between words and images rather than untranslatable discrepancies.

I maintain that the theory of congruity refers also to the second objective of my study. Even though finding the agreement between Pre-Raphaelite models and the imaginary characters they

posed for is more challenging than finding harmony between painting and poetry, we may observe a shocking proximity between the models and the artistic heroines. I may conclude that the fates of Ophelia, the lady of Shalott and Beatrice coincide with Elizabeth Siddal's life which was filled with grief, marked by a sudden demise, and finally idealized by Rossetti. In regards to Fanny Cornforth, in my opinion, from all of the Pre-Raphaelite artworks, *Found* shows the closest proximity with the life of the model. The artistic representation of a prostitute arriving to the big city in search of better prospects seems to be an exact re-telling of Cornforth's early situation. *Aurelia* and *Fair Rosamund*, on the other hand, coincide with Cornforth's life when she already belonged to the Brotherhood. Striking also is the closeness between Jane Morris and the heroines she posed for, in particular Proserpine and Astarte Syriaca. Their position between two worlds irresistibly resembles the circumstances of Jane's engagement in the relationship with William Morris and Gabriel Rossetti. The least obvious correspondence between the stunner and artistic character can be found in the case of Alexa Wilding. Even though we are low on resources which could provide more detailed insight in her life, I believe that my analysis sheds a new approximation to on her role in ekphrastic representations. In the case of *Venus Verticordia* the relationship between Wilding and the goddess is quite well visible – they both act as figures responsible for discords. In turn her sitting for *Lady Lilith* and *The Blessed Damozel* seems to be aimed at showing Rossetti's neutral and not emotionally marked attitude towards the created artworks.

Undoubtedly, the choice of the model was crucial for the Pre-Raphaelites. We may conclude that to a great extent the biographies of the stunners converge with the stories of the imaginary characters for whom they sat. The only remaining, and still unanswered, question is whether this well-matching choice of models was accidental, or if the Pre-Raphaelites intentionally chose these women to tell their stories by the use of historical and literary heroines.

During the process of writing my thesis I was developing new lines of thinking; at the same time I was less and less confident in some thoughts which I established at the beginning. Therefore, if I could modify something in my study, I would change the idea of "Ekphrastic Portrait of Pre-

Raphaelite Models” onto “Ekphrastic Portrait of Rossetti’s Models”. Rossetti not only specialized in portraying women but he also annotated these representations with his poems. I wish I had devoted part of my study to the analysis of his life and art. I could replace Millais’s *Ophelia* and Siddal’s *The Lady of Shalott* with Rossetti’s double works, for instance with *Beata Beatrix*, *A Sea Spell* or *La Bella Mano*. In this way I could represent a complete picture of one artist and my thesis would probably look more coherent. Nevertheless, I strongly believe that my findings will enrich the study of Pre-Raphaelite ekphrastic representations of women and that they will be helpful in looking for further similarities between models and artistic characters, not only in art of the Pre-Raphaelites but also in any other artistic creations.